

Statement of Cindy Long, Director, Child Nutrition Division

Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Field Hearing – Roybal Campus, Centers for Disease Control
Atlanta, Georgia

May 15, 2009

Thank you Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Chambliss, and members of the Committee for this opportunity to discuss USDA's Farm to School efforts and other aspects of Federal nutrition assistance programs that support local farmers and promote healthy eating and an active lifestyle for our Nation's school children. I serve as Director of Child Nutrition Programs for USDA's Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS). I have spent most of my career working on these important programs, and it is a privilege for me to represent our mission area before you today. However, I must emphasize that I am a career executive, not an appointed official. I anticipate that I may have to confer with Secretary Vilsack and his staff to provide you with answers on questions of policy.

Before I discuss the programs I want to offer some context on the problems related to the large and growing number of overweight and obese people in the United States. I am sure this information is not news to you, and can assure you that they have been matters of serious concern – and action – by USDA for many years.

The latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that two-thirds of adults are overweight or obese, and almost one-third of children and adolescents are overweight or obese. In the past 20 years, the percentage of children who are overweight has doubled and the percentage of adolescents who are overweight has more than tripled. The evidence is clear and overwhelming that these problems are truly reaching epidemic proportions and cut across all groups of our Nation. Unfortunately, there is no simple solution. While the immediate reasons for the large and growing numbers of overweight and obese people are clear and uncomplicated--too many of us eat too much, eat too much of the wrong things, and get too little physical activity--each of these sets of behaviors is subject to innumerable influences throughout our lives, especially as children. Shaping an environment that supports healthier choices for children is a responsibility shared by all those involved in their lives-families, schools, communities, and local, state and Federal policymakers.

I want to discuss some of the programs and activities that USDA is undertaking to ensure our children have a healthy diet and the educational foundation to continue to make the right nutritional choices in the future while continuing to support our local farmers. Matching our local farmers to our nutrition programs is a win-win for our children and local economies.

FNS Farm to School Activities

FNS is committed to working with our partners to identify strategies to link children with foods that are produced in the same community where they attend school. FNS has undertaken activities to help support effective and efficient local procurement initiatives for several years.

Local food procurement can contribute appropriately and efficiently toward meeting the diverse needs of child nutrition programs, within the context of Federal, State, and local procurement requirements. We have provided guidance on how schools can do business with local producers and still meet the Federal procurement requirements. These strategies include tailoring specifications to include high standards for product freshness and quality in an effort to obtain local produce. Reaching local producers can also be facilitated when the procurement falls below a small purchase threshold. In these circumstances, informal procurement methods may be used which can facilitate the participation of local producers.

In addition, recent legislation provides schools the ability to use geographic preference in some circumstances. Section 4302 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-246) amended section 9(j) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA) to require the Secretary of Agriculture to encourage institutions operating the Child Nutrition Programs to purchase unprocessed locally grown and locally raised agricultural products. As amended, effective October 1, 2008, the NSLA allows institutions receiving funds through the Child Nutrition Programs to apply a geographic preference when procuring unprocessed locally grown or locally raised agricultural products. In July 2008, FNS issued guidance on the use of geographic preference and continues to work with States and school districts to assist them in using this provision within the confines of Federal procurement regulations.

In addition to these efforts to assist schools with their own procurement efforts, we have also worked closely with the Department of Defense (DoD) since 1994 to utilize DoD's existing purchase and distribution system for school meals. Funding for the program began with \$3.2

million and later increased to \$50 million. FNS and DoD entered into a memorandum of understanding under which DoD buys and distributes fresh fruits and vegetables to schools using Federal commodity entitlement dollars. Some of these purchases are made locally.

We also support local farm to school efforts by providing technical assistance resources to our cooperating agencies. In 2000, FNS issued a step-by-step guide entitled *Small Farms/School Meals Initiative* which details how to bring small farms and local schools together. In 2005, FNS issued *Eat Smart—Farm Fresh! A Guide to Buying and Serving Locally-Grown Produce in School Meals*, which provides best practices and strategies for finding locally-grown food and implementing Farm to School initiatives. We will be updating this publication later this year, with new success stories, additional resources from outside organizations, and basic tools for operating a successful program from start to finish. To support these efforts, we have an Emerson Hunger Fellow assisting the Department with Farm to School issues. The Hunger Fellow is identifying opportunities to help institutions use local procurement options when appropriate, and determining the most effective ways to improve Farm to School efforts.

FNS also supports farm to school initiatives through its *Team Nutrition (TN) Training Grants*. TN Training Grants for Healthy School Meals offer funding to State agencies to establish or enhance sustainable infrastructure for implementing TN to support the implementation of USDA's nutrition requirements in school meals. Grants have been used for Farm to School related activities, such as school gardening programs.

Finally, the recent expansion in the 2008 Farm Bill of the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program provides another opportunity for linkages between schools and local producers. This program is designed to make fresh fruits and vegetable snacks available to elementary schoolchildren, and is targeted to students in the neediest elementary schools in each state. All students in participating schools receive fresh fruits and vegetables at no cost. Local producers can be an excellent source for schools to obtain fresh produce for the program.

Support for Healthy School Meals

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) gives children the nutrition they need to develop and grow. Compared to nonparticipants, NSLP participants are more likely to consume vegetables, fruit or 100 percent juice and milk, and less likely to consume beverages other than milk or 100 percent fruit juice at lunch and through the day. In addition to providing healthful food, the presence of a School Breakfast Program means that low-income students are more likely to start their school day with a substantial breakfast, ready to learn.

One of the most important linkages that USDA makes between agricultural producers and the health of our clients is to make fruits and vegetables an important part of nutrition assistance programs. We estimate that the programs together provided \$11 billion in support for fruit and vegetable consumption in 2008 – through USDA’s distribution to program providers, support for schools and other institutions to buy these nutritious foods, and support for clients to purchase them in the retail marketplace.

More generally, FNS has launched an aggressive initiative to improve the nutritional quality of our commodity programs. Schools participating in NSLP today have access to the widest choice of healthful USDA foods in history. Over the past two decades, we have worked to reduce the levels of fat, sodium, and sugar. We now offer schools more than 180 choices of quality products, including more fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low fat foods. Consider just a few examples:

- USDA pioneered a partnership with the Department of Defense to buy more than 60 types of fresh fruits and vegetables for schools. Besides fresh produce, USDA also purchases over \$180 million of canned, frozen, and dried fruits and vegetables for schools.
- USDA purchases brown rice, rolled oats, whole-wheat flour, whole-grain dry-kernel corn, and whole grain pastas; we are pursuing the purchase of whole-grain macaroni and quick-cooking brown rice.
- Most USDA canned vegetables meet the Food and Drug Administration’s “healthy” standard for sodium. Our intent is to reduce the sodium content of canned vegetables even more.
- Canned fruits must be packed in light syrup, water or natural juices.
- Since 1992, USDA beef is 85-percent lean, compared to a commercial standard of 70-percent lean. We also offer several types of reduced-fat cheese, and have eliminated *trans* fats, shortening, and butter.

It is important to remember that school districts are offered a wide range of choices, and select the foods they want from USDA’s foods available list. They are *never* required to accept any USDA food item they cannot effectively use or do not want to use.

In addition, we are working to ensure that our school meal nutritional requirements support and promote healthy eating. We have contracted with the Institute of Medicine to convene experts to develop recommendations for a comprehensive strategy to bring the school meal programs and the Child and Adult Care Food Program in line with the latest *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. We expect to receive their school meal recommendations this fall.

While the school meal program requirements are under review, we continue to encourage and support schools to follow the Dietary Guidelines within the current program structure. We have provided technical assistance materials to support these efforts. In addition, our Healthier US Schools Challenge is another key element in our efforts to promote healthy school environments.

Healthier US School Challenge

Because unhealthful beverage and food choices, as well as inadequate physical activity, at school undermine children's ability to learn and practice healthy eating, we have also focused on promoting healthy school nutrition environments and local school wellness policies. The Healthier US School Challenge encourages and rewards schools that have taken steps to make it easier for kids to make healthier dietary and physical activity choices during the school day. Schools earn Gold, Silver or Bronze awards by meeting specific criteria such as offering lunches that demonstrate healthy menu planning, providing nutrition education and opportunities for physical activity to students. Awards are for a two year period. To date, 569 schools have earned this prestigious award since its inception.

Our efforts in the nutrition assistance programs complement and are integrated with our strategies to promote healthy dietary practice, healthy weight, and active lifestyles for the general public. At the center of this commitment is the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) and its integral role in nutrition policy through the development and promotion of scientific, evidence-based dietary guidance and nutrition education. The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, published jointly every 5 years by the USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), is the cornerstone of Federal nutrition policy, allowing the Federal Government to speak with one voice. We are currently in the midst of preparing the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, an initiative that we will lead over the next two years, and which will serve as the core of Federal nutrition and research programs in the ensuing years.

A wide range of nutrition promotion efforts based on the *Dietary Guidelines* are already reaching the public on the Web and through other venues. *MyPyramid*, the Department's *Dietary Guidelines*-based food guidance system, has been integrated into the food marketplace through over a hundred innovative public-private partnerships to promote healthy eating and physical activity. These partnerships exist between CNPP and food companies, health care providers, day care facilities, consumer electronics companies, youth and education organizations, research organizations, and Federal and State agencies.

MyPyramid.gov provides interactive, personalized tools to help consumers, health professionals, and nutrition educators make food and physical activity choices that follow the *Dietary Guidelines*. The *MyPyramid Menu Planner*, a state-of-the-art personal dietary assessment tool, allows users to enter their age, gender and physical activity level to obtain quick and easy

appraisals of the extent to which their daily menus meet the *Dietary Guidelines* and ways to improve diet quality. The *MyPyramid Tracker* is an online diet and physical activity assessment tool that provides in depth information on diet quality and physical activity status, nutrients consumed, as well as providing nutrition messages and links to related government Web sites. Since the launch of MyPyramid.gov in 2005, public interest has been overwhelming: Over 7 billion hits, about 100 million each month, and over 3 million registrations to *MyPyramid Tracker*.

For many years, we have been working to integrate science-based nutrition and physical activity promotion within and across the programs. USDA makes a major investment in nutrition education delivered through the nutrition assistance programs – over \$800 million in 2008, including over \$300 million in SNAP and over \$480 million in WIC, almost all distributed as grants to State agencies. Our Team Nutrition initiative provides nutrition education and technical assistance to help schools serve healthier meals and motivate kids to form healthy habits. The *MyPyramid for Kids* and *Eat Smart. Play Hard* campaigns stress the need to balance what you eat with what you do. In December 2008, FNS released a set of sixteen consumer-tested nutrition education messages, designed to be used across all nutrition assistance programs to increase consumption of fruits, vegetables or low-fat milk products and encourage development of healthy eating habits among young children. States and others have moved quickly to adopt the messages, supporting content such as tips and recipes, and implementation guidance to put these messages into practice in all of the nutrition assistance programs.

We have been working with the Ad Council on a series of public service announcements (PSAs) designed to inspire parents and children to adopt healthier lifestyles for their families. In February, Secretary Vilsack announced the latest set of PSAs, featuring characters from Walt Disney's classic film, Pinocchio, recently re-released on DVD. The announcements encourage parents to visit MyPyramid.gov to find the right balance to a healthy lifestyle for their children.

This is not an exhaustive list of the initiatives and strategies that USDA is pursuing to ensure our children are getting the most nutritious meals available and to assist local farmers. But I hope that it offers a sense of our ongoing commitment to make sure that the programs we administer are working proactively and effectively to combat this substantial threat to our Nation's health and support our local farmers. But the strategies we have in place can make – are making – a real difference in the lives of the children and continue our traditional support of our local farmers.

Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Chambliss, I appreciate the opportunity to make this presentation, and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.